

Harmony Housing Solution

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HARMONY TWP. - Township officials are taking an innovative approach when it comes to meeting the state's latest round of low-income housing mandates.

The township's third-round interim Council on Affordable Housing proposal would give the township responsibility for fulfilling any state requirements as opposed to developers. The approach includes acquiring existing properties or partnering with a social service agency to provide a group home.

"This way we can control growth," Deputy Mayor Karen Buckley said.

Statewide 19 other municipalities have opted for "municipality-sponsored rental programs," state Department of Community Affairs spokesman Chris Donnelly said.

The third-round rules, which cover housing obligations from 1999 to 2014, are a departure from old regulations. Now the need for low-income housing is based on the growth of an area, Donnelly said, but it also requires municipalities to somehow provide housing, not just zone for it. The flexibility in meeting mandates is a new benefit, he said.

Harmony's plan was submitted to the state May 15 and the planning board will hold a second public hearing Wednesday.

It calls for the town to provide 10 to 20 duplex units for low-income housing; the number is fluid because requirements constantly change, Buckley said.

"That is whether we build them or purchase existing units," she said, explaining the township would prefer to buy.

The booming real estate market made buying existing properties difficult but Buckley said she still hopes the township can identify more homes to purchase.

Officials are hopeful they can partner with a nonprofit agency to build a duplex and a five-bedroom group home that could possibly serve Warren County's Arc clients. The group home would fill five COAH unit requirements.

"Right now we are working with Habitat for Humanity to meet the last unit of the second round and one unit for the third round," Buckley said, explaining the duplex would meet those requirements.

Habitat for Humanity is in the process of reviewing the legal aspects of a partnership, said Angelo Bolcato, the site selection chairman for the organization. There also has to be an agreement on what Habitat will build. As of now it's looking like a two-family home duplex first, he said.

"They will make the house fit in the township so it doesn't stick out like a sore thumb," Buckley said.

Once the legal kinks are ironed out, the property will be transferred over to Habitat and construction will start. A special committee selects the families based on several criteria, Bolcato said.

"The families will still work," he said. "It's the same Habitat philosophy: They have to put in sweat equity."